

Sarah Holmes, Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

Wednesday, February 16, 2022

*H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.

Good evening, my name is Sarah Holmes and I am a Community Educator and Victim Advocate at Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury. We are a domestic violence and sexual assault crisis agency serving 12 towns in the Greater Waterbury region. I am writing in strong support of the provision in the Governor's proposal in H.B. No. 5037 (COMM) AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.to enhance funding for victim service providers.

This funding provision is a direct result of the devastating loss of Victim of Crimes Act Funds (VOCA) that support our work supporting victims of sexual violence. VOCA funding, generated from federal criminal fines and fees, is at an all-time low due to an issue that redirected those fines and fees to the General Treasury for the past few years. In July, President Biden signed into law a measure that will correct this problem, and national experts expect the VOCA Fund should replenish in approximately two years. It is anticipated the two-year loss of funds will create a 50% cut to victim services for Connecticut.

VOCA funds ensure victims have access to support, counseling, advocacy, and help to navigate the complex criminal justice system and provide systems of care for victims and survivors of crime, including crisis interventions in the immediate aftermath of the crime.

My position at Safe Haven is partially funded through VOCA. I currently work with 6 survivors of sexual and domestic violence, providing long-term, weekly individual counseling to these clients. In addition to counseling and mental health support, I assist clients in applying for a variety of services, including: Victim Compensation, SSI for clients who are unable to work as a result of trauma and mental health issues, rental assistance to avoid eviction, utility assistance, changing locks on their residence, obtaining residence in sober living homes after treatment, DMHAS Acquired Brain Injury services, and accessing basic needs like food, clothing and hygiene products. In the majority of cases, these clients would have been unable to apply for these supportive services on their own, due to literacy challenges and/or lack of access to internet, transportation, or simply knowing these programs exist and how to navigate the application process.

Victim Advocates provide so much more to clients than crisis counseling and referrals. We assist clients in obtaining services with life-changing programs that provide victims with sustainable financial and mental health resources, as well as basic-need resources. Advocating for survivors to help meet these basic needs is crucial to long-term healing and recovery, both for the individual and the communities they live in.

I urge you to support the Governor's use of ARPA funds to ensure that the loss of VOCA funds does not harm the often silent victims in our state. We have seen firsthand the effects of the pandemic on our clients, and we must be able to continue to work with them to foster healing both with themselves and our communities. The pandemic has exacerbated the effects of trauma for many of our clients, particularly those who already experienced mental health issues and financial insecurity. Several of my clients would greatly benefit from engaging in therapy to

address mental health issues, yet have been on waiting-lists for services for over a year. While these clients are unable to access therapy, I have been able to provide emotional support and counseling to these clients, as well as helping them to identify coping skills to help manage stress, anxiety and trauma symptoms.

I invite you to visit Safe Haven of Greater Waterbury and meet with some of our staff to learn more about all of the critical services we offer to our clients and the Greater Waterbury community, including Community Education for students in Pre-K through college, and community outreach programs.

Thank you very much for your service to victims of crime, and victims of sexual violence, in Connecticut.

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